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MEMORANDUM TO THE FILES

FROM: POL - William Hallam

SUBJECT: Clandestine Detention Centers

I recently had a long conversation with a gentleman from La Plata who is the father of two disappeared persons and who has worked very hard to learn a few facts about how the repression is handled by Argentine authorities and who has tried to create for himself and his remaining family an understanding of what might have happened to its missing members. He has also been active in marshalling the families of disappeared persons in La Plata and must of course be regarded as an observer with a strong anti-government bias. He is, however, a professional man and I would rate his sanity and analytical powers as high. My contact described in considerable detail (even sketched a map) a clandestine detention center which existed near La Plata until about ~~February~~ ^{January} of this year. The facility was reached by driving straight through La Plata on the street that leads in from Buenos Aires out toward an abandoned railroad station in a small area known as Arana. Crossing the railroad tracks at Arana station and passing a YPS^F station a short distance away one comes upon a former ranch called "La Armonia". The ranch was acquired by the Army during Peronist times and has been for the past years used for maneuvers by the Seventh Infantry.

My contact visited the place during a brief period in January between the time that two buildings were dynamited and the place was apparently abandoned as an interrogation and holding center and the time it was retaken for more usual Army purposes and

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entrances were blocked by strands of barbed wire.

As an interrogation center "La Armonia" was a fairly porous place and for long there had been stories widely ~~placed~~ circulated in La Plata of the use ~~for~~ which it was being put. These stories principally came from low ranking policemen and Army enlisted troops who let slip comments which quickly made the rounds. The former ^{central} buildings or "casco" of the old estancia formed part of the complex. There were two large well constructed buildings which were used as torture centers. One of them had been dynamited before the visit of my contact. Another was intact. Two buildings were apparently used as cell blocks. One had been partly destroyed by ~~night~~ ^{2 light charge} dynamite, but one wall remained and parts of the cells along it. Behind the cells area was a wall pitted with bullet marks.

From a person who formerly worked at the facility people in La Plata learned that executions had routinely been performed by firing squad with prisoners lined against the building in which contained cells. The same person explained how bodies could be disposed of in trenches by putting down a layer of bodies and then covering them with a layer of rubber tires. The tires were set afire and the smell they gave covered the smell of burning flesh and quickly disposed of bodies. The same person who gave this information was able to give the names of several young people from locally prominent families whom he claimed personally to have seen at the facility. The names of young people disappeared but were not those of members of the family of my contact. (My contact estimates that in La Plata some 1,500 people disappeared since the military government took office. Activist groups however have been

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able only to document and list 600 cases. According to my contact, there is still a great deal of fear in La Plata -- which from all accounts was more heavily hit on a per capita basis than any other Argentine city. Its very large university was decimated.) Not everyone picked up in La Plata however was taken to "Arana" ^{for the} ~~before there~~ initial interrogations. Others were taken to the "robos y hurtos" police station on 55th Street between 12th and 13th Avenues. Others were taken to the "puente 12" near Ezeiza airport. Others were taken to the Naval School at La Plata, and others still (especially those from ^{the} Ensenada and ^{suburbs of 12th} Bariza) were taken to the headquarters of the local Marine battalion at 50th and 122nd Streets near the outskirts of the city in a place called "the forest of La Plata." This perhaps reflected the preferences of the several groups that made raids in La Plata. ~~Both~~ ^{the} Army, the Federal Police and the Navy ^{PLA} routinely ran operations in the city. My contact was reasonably certain that Army raids were directed from the Palmero Headquarters of the First Army Command via an intermediate headquarters at Viejo Bueno, located near the Army facilities at MonteChingolo.

All these places were, however, (including Arana-La Arma¹³nia) seemed to have been primarily torture-interrogation centers at which prisoners remained for short periods. There were other holding places for those who would be kept longer. One was located at an Argentine Air Force warehouse between the suburbs of Quilmes and Bernal between the town of Quilmes itself and the River Plate. According to seepage into La Plata from Army and police underlings ~~the~~ ^{that} facility would hold about 400 people. It was laughingly referred to as "Las Malvinas". Orders would be

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given to drivers for example to make a run to "Arana" to pick up prisoners to hauled to "Las Malvinas".

Less is known about another longer term holding facility located somewhere in the Banfield area. Persons who drove prisoners were overheard to remark that they had to make a "run to Banfield," leading to speculation that their destination could be a large police property located in that area or possibly a series of houses believed to have been rented by the police.

Here speculation overtakes even the hearsay evidence of the drivers who were heard to speak of "Banfield." Two women who had relatives held in a prison for common criminals near Ezeiza airport brought the following story: They took a train to the small Ezeiza village railroad station located a few kilometers from the airport. They were aware that nearby was a large, recognized prison for women and a large facility for men. They started toward a building which they believed was the one they saw. They inquired of a passerby just short of the building who told them no -- that was the place where the "secret prisoners" were held. If they were looking for their relatives in jail they should head out in another direction. The women went ahead, having but a short distance to go, but when they arrived a caretaker came out and told them that there was no one present -- that the place was closed. He directed them to the well known prison they sought. Other stories circulate in La Plata about prisoners held at the Azul Army Regiment and the Magdalena Army Regiment and an old war ship moored somewhere along the River Plate. This is, however, speculation based purely upon rumor.

(Embassy officer Kenneth Sackett, who interviews PEN prisoners in various prisons in connection with the Right of Option Program

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commented when he was told about this speculation, however, that from what he has been told "every town in Argentina with a population of more than 2,000 must have had ^{its} interrogation center some where just at the town's outskirts -- probably a military installation of some kind or another." His comments was based upon many conversations with prisoners from all over Argentina who described their initial interrogation experiences.)

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